

# Balancing county's books is no easy task

by Thomas E. Perez

Three years ago, I decided to run for County Council because I believe that local government is where the rubber hits the road, and where I can make a real difference in people's lives. I never realized how accurate my instincts would turn out to be.

There has never been a more important time to be in local government. As a result of the abdication of responsibility on so many issues by the Bush and Ehrlich administrations, Montgomery County — and other jurisdictions across the state — is left holding the bag. This bag of broken federal and state promises now exceeds \$200 million dollars.

For instance, the Bush administration's refusal to meet its statutory obligation regarding special needs children is costing the county more than \$100 million additional dollars. School construction used to be an equal partnership between the county and state. Six years ago, almost half of the school construction dollars in our county came from the state. Today, as a result of Gov. Robert Ehrlich's intransigence, less than 10 percent of school construction dollars come from the state.

The federal Section 8 housing program to assist low-income people has been pillaged by the Bush administration. Waiting lists abound for critical social service programs because of state and federal budget cuts. The list of broken promises goes on and on. We cannot turn our backs on this unmet need, whether it is schools, transportation, housing or the safety net.

But at the same time, we must be mindful of rising property tax bills that are a function of the 2003 Ehrlich 5-cent property tax hike and of soaring home assessments. Rising assessments are the classic good news/bad news story. They are a bellwether of our success. Montgomery County continues to be the engine of the state economy. Our world-class public schools, vibrant neighborhoods and wonderful park

system make us a desirable place to live.

Rising home values provide a sizable future nest egg for homeowners. Soaring assessments also mean that the dream of home ownership is becoming more distant for so many working families. In addition, the rising tax bill raises severe challenges for elderly people on fixed incomes and young people struggling to make ends meet.

These challenges are personal for me. I grew up in a single-parent household in upstate New York. My mother owned our home free and clear, but had virtually no other assets, and lived on a limited fixed income. The only reason she could stay in her home was because her kids paid her property tax bill. There are scores of "house rich, cash poor" people in this county. It would be unconscionable if they had to sell their home because they cannot afford the tax bill.

In the coming months, the council will be tackling this challenge. My personal hope is that we can fashion a package of across-the-board property tax relief along with additional targeted relief for homeowners who need it most. It is too early to tell. Things will be clearer once we get more up-to-date information about our fiscal situation, come spring.

It would be far easier to provide significant tax relief if the Bush and Ehrlich administrations would simply keep their promises. But the bag of broken promises we are holding keeps getting heavier. The reckless Bush tax cuts are coming at the expense of future generations that will be responsible for our skyrocketing federal deficits, as well as at the expense of local governments across the country that are saddled with additional unfunded mandates.

It's important that we fill in these gaps where we can — and provide property tax relief.

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